

Camden residents: “You cannot trust them now because of Grenfell. It’s never going to be the same again”

Robert Stevens
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Around 4,000 of the poorest residents in the north London borough of Camden borough were evacuated from their homes following the June 14 Grenfell Tower inferno.

External cladding on four blocks in the Chalcots Estate was carried out by the companies involved in refurbishing Grenfell Tower. Grenfell was covered in highly flammable cladding as part of a “refurbishment,” which led to a small kitchen fire in a fourth floor apartment rapidly spreading.

The fire brigade also found that fire safety measures throughout four buildings—Taplow, Burnham, Bray and Dorney—were non-existent, including issues with fire doors and exposed gas pipes. The Fire Brigade told the council that residents lives were in danger and there was “nothing to do to make blocks safe that night.” That evening Labour-run Camden Council announced the evacuation.

But while the four blocks were evacuated, the fifth, Blashford, was deemed safe as it has different “design elements” and fire doors and is not as tall.

As with the residents at Grenfell, tenants in the Camden blocks have complained about fire safety issues for years and were also ignored by the authorities.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to Blashford tenants.

Speaking about the Grenfell fire, Sandra said, “It was terrible. I didn’t find out until the next day. My son-in-law lived on the 23rd floor and has been announced as one of the dead.”

Sandra didn’t believe the figure being claimed by the Metropolitan Police of 80 fatalities at Grenfell, saying, “I reckon a lot more, hundreds.”

No list has been made public of the number of people that ordinarily resided in Grenfell Tower. Sandra said, “How do they not know who was in that tower block? That’s disgusting, all those flats that went up. How can they not know, when they get paid rent for people living there?”

Her neighbour April said, “Due to the number of people that have been announced as OK the number of dead doesn’t add up to the number of flats and the number of people who lived there.”

Blashford residents had complained about numerous issues to the council via their housing manage. Sandra said, “We’ve got an asbestos issue in here as well, and they’re trying to deny it. It’s been going on for a while. It’s in our tiles under our lino.” She said all the flats in the block had such tiles. “They were there when we moved in,” but the council are “just concerned with doing the communal areas. They said that they would be going through the paperwork and get back to me. They got back to me yesterday and have now said they have got the paperwork and it’s only for the communal areas.

“There’s 72 flats over 18 floors, with only one stairwell out of here.” Since the internal repairs to the building began, residents found out that a further safety hazard was the existence of Medium-density fibreboard (MDF) wood in the ceilings of communal areas which has had to be removed.

April said, “We had a massive meeting with the council about the cladding and we have been told the internal problems have to be looked at before they will look at the cladding.”

The flammable cladding has been on Blashford for 11 years.

“At the meeting we wanted answers and we didn’t get any. We wanted to know who had signed off on the works. The head of the council and the housing chief was there. I asked who was contracted to carry out the fire checks on these buildings and he wouldn’t answer. I then asked how often were they to be done, and he said yearly. I then said, ‘OK then why then for the last 11 years have all the signs, the fire escape signs and procedures to follow in case of a fire, on all our landings, been signs meant for offices, and not for tower blocks?’”

Sandra added, “We’ve had fire extinguishers that we have been told you have to be trained to use. Also we have a lot of foreign people in these blocks here who cannot read English and wouldn’t be able to use them. Every fire extinguisher was stolen from the block/communal areas and we have not had any for a year.

“We just want answers. There are lots of people who don’t want to come back here. The meeting was very angry. I don’t feel safe living here.”

April said that residents now had a different attitude to the authorities because of the Grenfell fire. “It’s taken such a mass tragedy to highlight something that actually should have been looked at and picked up on. You cannot trust them now because of Grenfell. It’s never going to be the same again. I know people here who have got wheelchairs who live on high floors.”

Sandra added, “People are going to have to fight and it’s going to have to be the everyday people because that’s who it’s happening to.”

On the devastating cuts to fire service in the capital, Sandra said, “We lost a fire station in Belsize Park. It was a big one and has been sold for luxury flats—surprise, surprise!” Commenting on the social divide in London, she said, “Just around the corner they are living in £2 million houses in St. John’s Wood and Primrose Hill. It’s supposed to be a well-to-do area, NW3 [the post code], but obviously not for us.”

Jackie is from Canada and lives in social housing just over the road from Blashford Tower. She said, “Just look at the fire stairs coming down at Blashford House. The fire escape is just three feet away from the massive amounts of the same cladding as Grenfell had. There’s no protection from the outside. It’s just concrete walls and half the walls are just like chicken wire, there is no protection. If there’s a fire raging three feet away from

you, you are going to get burned and the smoke is going to get in. It’s not sealed off, it’s not airtight and if people are going down the stairwell from a fire they are going to die. There is no protection.

“There should be some kind of ventilation. If there’s massive amounts of smoke it’s all going in the stairwell. You wouldn’t be able to see where you were going. You wouldn’t be able to breathe. There’s nothing protecting you from a fire.

“It’s a single staircase and very small with only a few people only able to go down at a time. I could not believe it how flammable everything is. In Canada there would have to be sprinklers, dry risers and sealed doors. Imagine how much smoke would be billowing into that space, imagine the heat. When there is mesh the flames would be coming through.”



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